



**JACKIE SHROFF:
The man
who made
the mean face
respectable**

By Vinati Tikku

At the Master's Tutorial School in Bombay where he smoked his first cigarette when he had no business to be doing so, nobody would've thought he was going to make a serious and profitable business of it. And many years later, when Jackie Shroff's mean-eyed face inhaling cigarette smoke was plastered on hoardings all over the country in a massive ad campaign that immediately propelled him to the top of the modelling ranks, I wonder if they recognised him as the boy who was refused a passing certificate. I doubt it — whatever he might have become later, Jackie Shroff was hardly the model schoolboy.

In a sense, his popularity as a model and the success of the Charminar campaign marked the culmination of a slow but sure change in public taste. By the mid-seventies, discerning Indians had dumped pudding faces for a more positive image of masculinity. In the Hindi film world Amitabh's unconventional face had obliterated wishy-washy reincarnations of Biswajit. And advertising agencies were on the lookout for the craggy, unsmiling face they hoped would sell their products. A hawk-eyed model co-ordinator at Na-

ARVIND SHAH

tional Advertising was the first to spot it in the office hour rush at Flora Fountain. The fact that it came on a lithe, six foot frame helped. Jackie was then working for a travel agency — the nth desultory job, since he'd dropped out of school — and interested in the modelling offer. A string of assignments followed — Century, Navsari, Ashoka Textiles — satisfactory but unmemorable. It was the Charminar campaign in 1979-'80 however that brought out the best in him. Anand Rao who shot the film remembers looking for "an ordinary, yet special" face. "Jackie who was a relative newcomer, was pitted against the more well-known model Suresh Oberoi, but I thought he acquitted himself very well. No fuss absolutely. He even skidded once during the mobike shot. But he was quickly up and ready for a retake. As a cameraman, I found he was a very comfortable, very relaxed performer. Yes, it was a very successful campaign — well exploited in print and on hoardings. The most eloquent compliment paid to Jackie is that even the new Charminar model looks like him!"

What made Jackie so special was partly his suitability for the product. His tough, unsmiling face was just right for the strong, unfiltered cigarette he was selling. But more than that it was his personality. It seemed to transcend the product and in the ultimate analysis, it was not cigarettes, but a mysterious package of masculinity and sex appeal that he was marketing. And of course, people responded. Other ad agencies were quick to cash in on his marketability. Jackie Shroff, school drop-out and until now, no more than a Nepean Sea Road 'dada' was suddenly hot modelling property. At Pastry Palace — a beer bar and eating joint he frequented for many aimless years — he was beginning to be recognised. He was stared at by curious onlookers. Schoolgirls giggled when they saw him. The absent-minded scratched their heads, wondering where they'd seen him before. Subhash Ghai picked him to play the lead in a forthcoming film. 'Celebrity' readers in Bangalore voted him the best looking man in the country. At 25, and in spite of himself, Jackie Shroff had become one of the best-known faces the country.

Or had he? At the restaurant rendezvous I almost fail to recognise him! He strokes his recently sprouted beard apologetically. He is clearly not used to giving interviews. I am not used to mixing tall, dark and handsome men with my professional life. We sit



Hardly the model schoolboy and (inset) with his mother.

across each other tongue-tied, in respectful obedience to the admonishing hiss of sizzlers. Ssh....

He is overly polite — a bit overwhelmed by the whole thing. He pours out my coffee, goes through some agonising moments deciding whether he should stir it as well; there is a very fine dividing line between being a gentleman and playing mother, and I suppose he can't afford to project the wrong image. I take a quick look at my questions to see which is the least embarrassing. The home-work I've done on him hasn't thrown up a single one! College education — nil. School — expelled? Girls — known to be a womaniser. Check. Activities — hangs out a Pastry Palace, plays video games, gang-leader of neighbourhood ruffians, has been involved in street fights, has been to the police lock-up several times... Umm... definitely not the stuff of which polite, ice-breaking conversations are made. I try my luck with a relatively harmless one. "What does it take to be a good model, Jackie?" He smiles, rolls his eyes upwards in a mock pensive gesture and then replies, "I guess you have to be a little dumb." I sink back into my chair in sheer relief. There's nothing like a sense of humour to help things along.

I realise later that there was little cause for worry. The man is a natural. The way he tells it there's nothing embarrassing about being thrown out of school, indulging in gang-fights or landing up in the lock-up occasionally. "I was so alive in those days," he says wistfully, "now I feel bogged down... pressurised by my work. There was this guy, a close friend of mine who was interested in this girl. He'd call her up and one day her brother came on the line and abused the poor boy. Then these guys landed up at our school. Boy, did I get pasted that day..." he pauses to chuckle at an obviously fond memory. "But, mind you we gave it back to them, we sure did. I must have looked disapproving at this point

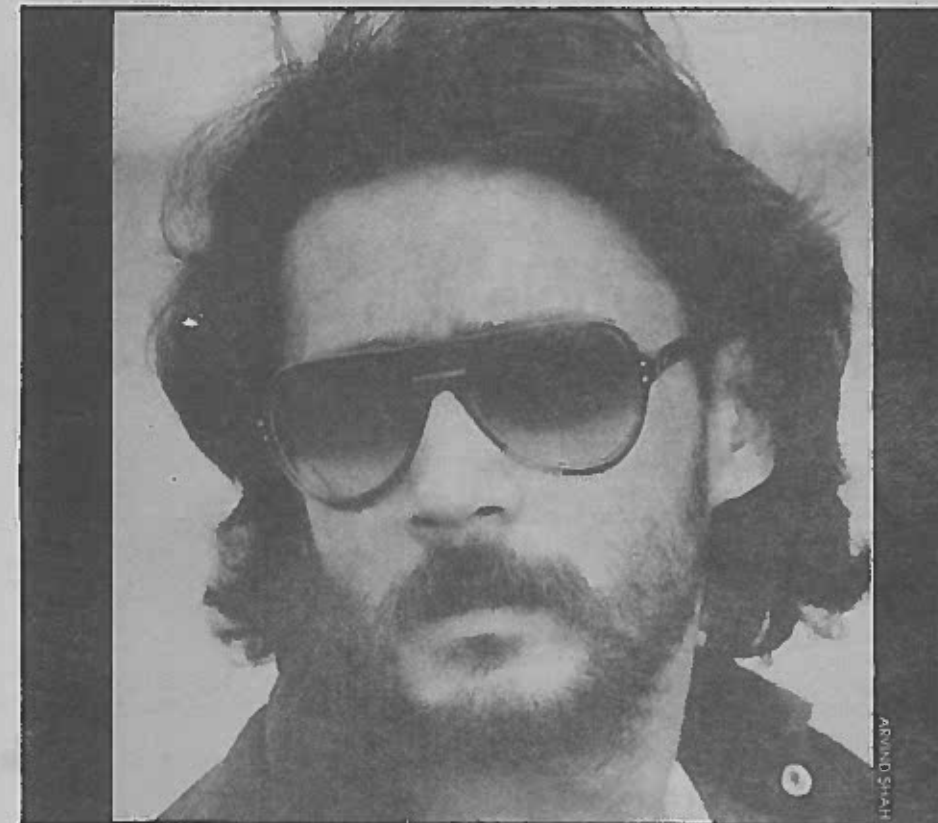
because he suddenly throws up his arm and protests, "What's wrong with it? Competition is healthy. It reminds me of the knights fighting duels for the hand of a fair lady." I want to tell him that it reminds me of the loudest Hindi film I ever saw, but I don't. There's no point. Like all Aquarians Jackie inhabits a dream world: romantic, ethereal and consistently unreal. The kind of guy who can grab an onion ring out of the salad bowl and propose to his female companion of the moment. Crazy. On the way to one photography session he hears a transistor blaring away at a Chowpatty bhel-puri stall and wonders if there's a beach party on. "That's where you human beings are different from us, Aquarians. You are so goddamn practical," he complains.

It is hardly surprising that in the tinsel world of advertising Jackie is a much misunderstood man. Modelling colleagues speak of him as a loner. Ad film-maker Kailash Surendranath who has worked with Jackie on several campaigns recalls the time when they were shooting the Cadbury's drinking chocolate film in Gulmarg: "He would lock himself up in his room and prefer to spend most evenings by himself." Jackie himself makes no secret of his dislike for the modelling world. "Basically I'm a hick," he says, "I'm ill at ease at parties. I feel stupid." Kailash who has known Jackie for a long time, even before he started modelling, has an explanation for this. "Jackie probably finds the ad crowd superficial. He comes from a very ordinary family and he's far more down-to-earth than most people in advertising. But he's an honest, decent guy and I like him for that."

His behaviour, I notice during the photography session, certainly fits into the son-of-the-soil syndrome. He thinks nothing of sharing his cigarette with the cabbie, has the most remarkable rapport with waiters and carries on a reasonably intelligent conversa-

tion with a little beggar boy who's hanging around. If any explanation is needed, he provides it himself. "I believe in universal brotherhood," he says, tap-tapping the Aquarian bracelet he always wears, with a fingernail. The only reason I have for believing the statement is that he says it most unselfconsciously. It's the sort of thing you can say without smiling, only if you believe in it.

True to his zodiac sign, he has not been very planned or professional about his career. Everything seems to have just "happened." Everything includes his most challenging assignment to date — a Hindi feature film produced and directed by Subhash Ghai and slated for release around mid-'83. "I've been cast in and as 'Hero'," he says miming the jingle. "The assignment came to me very easily," he confesses, "I haven't realised the seriousness of it yet — once it hits me I'll probably be out for the count!" He is aware of the other models who have tried to make it in films and failed, but for every Benjamin Gilani or Deepak Prasher I mention he trots out a Zeenat Aman or Kabir Bedi. In short, he's optimistic. So is Subhash Ghai with whom I later check out Jackie's acting capabilities. "Mark my words," Subhash says waggling a prophetic finger, "this man is going to be a superstar."



He inhabits a dream world — romantic, ethereal and consistently unreal.

The story of 'Hero' runs perilously close to Jackie's own chequered past. It is about a ne'er-do-well who falls in love and turns over a new leaf. Subhash Ghai says he selected Jackie for his mature face — the only one among a crop of baby-faced aspirants. And Jackie himself has no qualms about selling it. "I'm in films because I want to make money. Besides, I have no other creative talent, what else can I do?" I look at my notes on him and have to nod in agreement.

"I first realised I was good looking when I was in the 1st standard. The teacher selected me to be Santa Claus!"

"You play video games rather well, I notice."

"Yes, 'Defenders' is my favourite. I can overturn the score twice." He is dead-pan.

"Don't you think it is stupid and childish?"

"No, it's bad because it's bad for the eyes," he says simply.

I begin to realise that there's no arguing with him. He is simply not bound by logic, rationale or what people might say. Arvind Shah his friend, photographer and guide of 20 odd years says, "he's the kind of guy who

will call night 'day' if his friend wants him to." The clumsy translation of the Hindi film cliché aside, I can see what he means. Their affectionate banter during the photography session speaks of a deep and abiding relationship. "Aaj mein tujhe khoob bhagunga," wows Arvind smiling into his camera, as Jackie gets ready for a jogging shot. Many retakes later, Jackie raises his arms in mock anger to yell 'C'mon brother!' but he's still smiling.

Later, as they cool off with beer at 'Naaz', Jackie insists I sit facing the view, not the Arabs. Ever since I've given up arguing, I notice, he's more friendly, more forthcoming about himself. His name, he tells me is actually Jai Krishna. His father is 71, a Gujarati, and doesn't know that his son smokes. For an astrologer, which he professes to be, that's pretty bad, but anyhow, I've decided not to argue, so I let him continue. His mother's Turkish, "which accounts for my chinky eyes." He'd like to make enough money and retire by the age of 45, "to a stud farm with a beautiful garden, where I'll play video games and fly model planes." Other fantasies include a world trip by car and an idyllic holiday in Ceylon. "But I don't want to think too much about all this — if you want something too badly, you don't get it." As qualifications to dreams go, this one's fairly philosophical.

Meanwhile he's having fun. He gets up early "to see the dabbewalis and schoolgirls pass by," attends occasional sessions with his director, visits the tailors, swims and rides whenever he can. In the evening he hangs out at Pastry Palace with his friends, guzzling beer, "it's better than drinking Bombay water." He eats only vegetarian food, adores cooking and just for the record is not afraid of growing old or his looks fading. "I first realised I was good looking when I was in the 1st standard. The teacher selected me to be Santa Claus!"

"How do you react to girls fawning over you?" Despite all the noble intentions in the world about keeping quiet, there are certain questions one has to ask. "They don't," he replies, "they are scared of me! I've actually seen girls turn away and walk in the opposite direction."

"But I'm sure a lot of girls would love to be sitting here in my place." It feels good to be arguing again.

"Introduce me," he laughs.

Now, I'll be darned if this article hasn't done just that!